DEATH AND MOURNING
Customs and Sayings: A Daily Part of Life

Death
In the early days of the United States, and up until the late 19th century, death was not only common, but a regular occurrence in everyday life – especially in times of war, for women in childbirth, and for children. In fact, the death rate for children under ten was almost one in three. With few hospitals, doctors who did not have today's training or sterile requirements, medical treatment relying on bleeding and herbs, and generally more primitive living conditions, as well as strenuous, essential physical labor for even everyday chores, many also died from cuts, accidents, tainted water, poor nutrition, and disease. Life was physical, hard, and poor. People worked six days a week. Although mourning the dead was regarded as a required sign of respect and "an outward sign of inward sorrow" that warded off thoughtless inquiries and comments, mourning customs also reflected a necessary practicality.

Mourning Customs
Before 1850. Early on, the coffin was a simple, hexagonal wooden box made by the family or local carpenter. With no refrigeration or embalming available, coupled with the need for men and women to get back to farming and daily chores, burial had to be quick, especially in more rural areas; and death was more intimately and personally experienced.

That times were hard and poor show in this photo. The simple coffin was brought in a wagon, and family members are not dressed in any special mourning clothes.

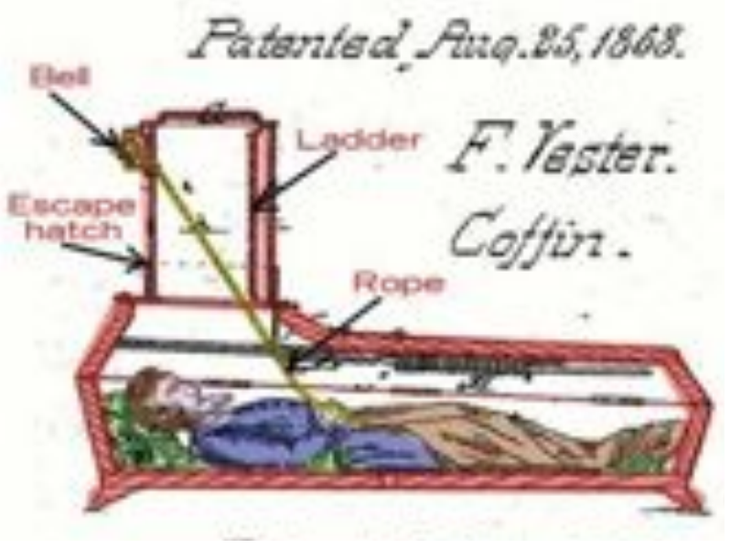
Just as the family took physical care of older and sick family members during life, so did they continue caring after death. Female members prepared the body for burial, usually in his or her own everyday clothes, although for the very poor in a shroud. The deceased was laid out in the family's front parlor, where he or she was mourned privately by the family and friends.

The typical mourning wake of 3-4 days was both a practical way to ensure that the deceased was truly dead and not in a coma, and to give those far away time to travel. Herbs, such as rosemary and tansy, would be set out in the room to counteract the smell of the corpse. A crepe ribbon, swag, or funeral wreath on the door warned visitors that grief resided in the house. The funeral usually took place in the home or church and was announced by the tolling of the bell. The deceased was buried in a family tomb or grave in the church or town burial ground, or in a family plot on private land. Grave robbing was not uncommon, as doctors and others wanted to learn about the human body by examining corpses. Therefore some graves were bricked over.

Mourning clothes were worn at and after the funeral, and there were prescribed traditions for men and women. Men were expected to wear a black or dark suit to the funeral and a black armband or hatband perhaps for three months. Women were expected to do more and for longer periods of time. For the first month, women did not go out in public, perhaps only to church, wore no lace, only dull jewelry, and black dress of bombazine (silk and wool) with layer of crepe over it. Covering the head was mandatory. Crepe mourning veils, however, were gradually discouraged for health reasons. Lungs and skin were adversely affected by the odor, dye, and the feel of crepe. Eyes inflamed by weeping could become permanently weakened by looking through the crepe veil and being rubbed by it.

Mid 1800s and onward. The rectangular casket was replaced by a body-shaped coffin, and in the late 19th century the casket was mass produced. Handles and other hardware were available wholesale to the undertaker and ordered from illustrated mail-order catalogs. Moreover, there were inventions of new types of caskets with special viewing devices or alarms to allow a person to signal for help, or to escape, if he or she had been being buried alive.

By 1870 embalming techniques had improved. Undertaking became a profession. Undertakers became "funeral directors." The dead were now the "deceased." The home parlor became the "living room," and the funeral "parlor" replaced the home as a place to lay out the dead. Death became more secular and removed.



Cemeteries also changed. Inspired by the beautiful Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, Mount Auburn Cemetery was created in Cambridge, MA, in 1831. It was soon followed by Laurel Hill in Philadelphia, PA, Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, NY, and others featuring rolling landscapes, watercourses, lakes, specimen trees, and curving paths. The rural cemetery movement had begun. While the beautiful cemeteries replaced smaller church graveyards, disorganized public cemeteries, and family plots on private land where lack of embalming had led to concerns about water pollution, they also inspired the creation of public parks. The larger community cemeteries were well organized and operated by voluntary associations which sold plots to individuals. After the Civil War, crematoriums and columbariums (structures with niches for funeral ashes) also appeared.

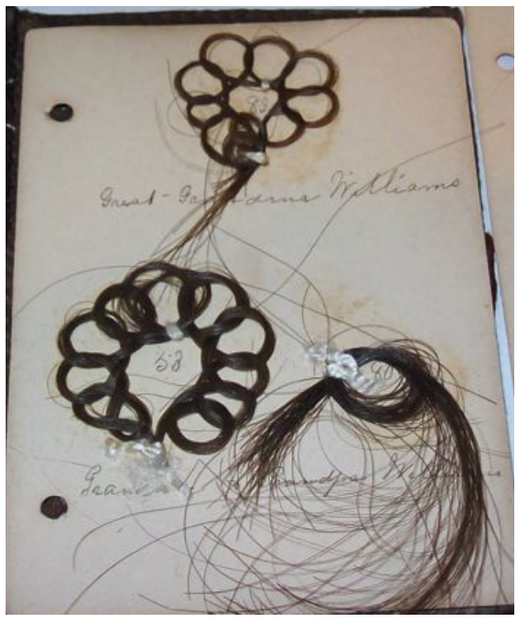
By the late 1880s more Americans were dying in hospitals than at home. As dealing with the dead became more public, it also become more elaborate and fashionable. Decorated coffins and impressive vehicles – no longer a plain black wagon, but often an elaborate horse-drawn vehicle – carried the dead in style.

When Prince Albert died in 1861 and England's Queen Victoria went into heavy mourning, society on both sides of the Atlantic became almost obsessive about the expression of grief. As Victorians got wealthier, the middle class could mourn – something previously more for the rich. As American society moved into the 20th century, the length of formal mourning became shorter and shorter. In general, mourning etiquette was one year for parents and children, six months for grandparents or siblings. A widow (less for a widower) was expected to mourn for at least two years with one year of deep mourning. Older women might choose to wear mourning attire for life. Today, mourning dress is rare for more than the immediate family or for long periods of time.

Mourning Relics/Mementos

Jewelry. Pieces of mourning jewelry that incorporated a lock of hair from the deceased were widely popular in New England through the first half of the 19th century. Hairwork, the making of decorative objects from human hair, often memorialized a loved one and meant that those still living were always united with the dead.

Photo courtesy Woodstock History Center



Postumous Photographs. Known also as memorial, mourning, or post-mortem portraits, photographs of deceased children especially were often the only chance to capture the image of a loved child. The long exposure time needed for the newly invented photography made deceased subjects easy to photograph. Often the subject was shown as if in deep sleep or arranged to appear resting on a couch or in a crib – sometimes posed with a favorite toy or plaything. Frequently the child was photographed with a family member, often the mother or a sibling (near right).

Mourning Traditions

- Southerners were poor after the Civil War. Mourning clothes were the first ready-made clothes. If people couldn't afford them, they dyed their own or shared them.
- Windows, pictures, mirrors, and clothes were draped in black crepe.
- Crepe wilted in rain – another reason mourning women stayed inside.
- Black dye smelled foul (therefore filled house with flowers or herbs).
- Candles also masked rotting odors.
- Wake. Someone watched the body every minute before burial for 3-4 days to make sure the deceased was dead and not in a coma.
- White was a popular color for the funeral of a child.
- Passing bell rang 6 times for a woman and 9 times for a man – with one toll added for each year of life – when the body was being buried.
- "Mutes" were hired mourners who followed the hearse.
- Graves were oriented with heads to west and feet to east. The custom originated with pagan sun worshippers, but was carried on by Christians who believed the summon to judgment came from the east.
- Lavish meals (or collations) were often served after interment.
- Funeral biscuits wrapped in white paper sealed with black wax were given to guests as favors.
- Specific periods existed for women not to leave house or receive guests. After the funeral, personal stationery with a black edge was sent out to show that the family could now receive visitors. A wide black border indicated a recent death; a narrow border showed time had passed.
- Personal handkerchiefs also had a black border.
- Etiquette books were written on the topic of mourning and funerals.
- Rural cemeteries. Many families made pleasure trips to those beautiful places as if to a public park. Cemeteries symbolized the better place and better life to which the deceased had gone.

Mourning Superstitions

- Wear black so as not to draw attention lest Death claim the next victim.
- Wear veil so Death could not see the face of a mourner and take another.
- Cover mirrors so spirits don't get trapped.
- Turn family photos face down to prevent others from being possessed by dead spirits.
- Stop the clocks in the house of the deceased so Death couldn't take another to the grave. Restart clocks when burial is over.
- Carry body out feet first so spirit doesn't beckon others to follow.
- If several deaths occur in the same family, tie a black ribbon to everything left alive that enters the house, even dogs and chickens, to protect them against Death.
- If the deceased had lived a good life, flowers would bloom on the grave. If he or she had been an evil person, only weeds would grow.

"Saved by the Bell"

Some say this phrase comes from the boxing world and signifies that one was momentarily saved from further pugilistic destruction by the ringing of the bell at the end of a round. Others say that that in earlier days, especially around the second half of the 19th century, people were scared of being buried alive. Therefore a bell was often placed inside or outside the coffin and above the earth with a string that was tied to a finger or toe in such as way as to waken anyone on guard if the deceased were alive, pulled the string, and rang the bell, thereby guarding against premature death and burial if that person had been in a coma. In addition, screws were frequently placed on the inside of the casket lid to allow the top to be opened from the inside if the corpse were alive. Potential comas were, of course, a reason for a "wake" of 3-4 days for the alleged dead to revive. Sometimes a glass plate was inserted in the top of the coffin so people could see evidence of breath if the "dead" person were actually alive. Other safety coffins were offered for sale, but there is no record of any actual success rate for them. The matter of oxygen depletion inside the coffin remained a lasting obstacle.